
**Family Court Services Snapshot Series:
1993 Client Baseline Study**

Data Collection Methods

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Family Court Services Snapshot Series: **1993 Client Baseline Study**

Uniform Statistical Reporting System

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Family Court Services Snapshot Series: 1993 Client Baseline Study

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The 1993 Client Baseline Study is a representative cross-section of parents using family court services across the state. Like its 1991 predecessor, the 1993 Client Baseline Study offers reliable statistics about the utility of family court services and documents the prevailing experiences of clients in court-based resolution of disputes about child custody and visitation. The 1993 study was designed to address new questions raised in light of current budget constraints, rising caseloads, and changes in law and court procedures.

The 1993 Client Baseline Study is part of a program of research that fulfills the Statewide Office of Family Court Services' mandate to provide uniform statewide statistics that advise family law policy.¹ Entitled *The Uniform Statistical Reporting System*, the program's mission is to provide rigorous statistics on issues facing policy makers, judges, attorneys, court personnel, researchers, special interest groups, and parents who use the family courts. The Uniform Statistical Reporting System (USRS) follows a parsimonious design, consisting of a network of discrete but interlocking studies that can be used alone or combined in different ways to address specific policy questions. The cornerstone of the USRS is the *Family Court Services Snapshot Series* described below.

(1) *The 1991 Client Baseline Study*² sampled 1,699 family court sessions across the state, collecting extensive information from 2,504 mothers and fathers who received mediation services. The sampled sessions represented 83 percent of all family court services sessions conducted during the study period.

(2) *The 1992 Default and Uncontested Dissolution Matched Sample Study* gathered information about 696 fathers and mothers who resolved custody and visitation matters without the use of court-based dispute resolution services. Comparison with the 1991 Client Baseline Study participants illustrates differences in the prevailing experiences of those who use different methods to determine child custody.

(3) *The 1991 Client Followup I*³ interviewed 1,532 parents up to two years after their participation in the 1991 Client Baseline Study. Parents reported on family outcomes

¹Under Family Code sections 1850-1852, the California Statewide Office of Family Court Services is mandated to (1) assist counties in implementing mediation and conciliation proceedings; (2) administer a program of grants for research, study, and demonstration projects in the area of family law; (3) administer a program for the training of court personnel involved in family law proceedings; (4) establish and implement a uniform statistical reporting system; and (5) conduct research on the effectiveness of current family law for the purpose of shaping future public policy.

²The 1991 data collection was the first in the Family Court Services Snapshot Series and was initially referred to as the California Family Court Services Snapshot Study. A full description of the content, design, and methodology of the study can be found in California Family Court Services Snapshot Study: Data Collection Methods (1994). Statewide Office of Family Court Services, Administrative Office of the Courts, San Francisco, CA.

³This study was formerly referred to as the 1993 California Statewide Followup Study. A description of the content, design, and methodology can be found in 1993 California Statewide Followup Study: Data Collection Methods (1994). Statewide Office of Family Court Services, Administrative Office of the Courts, San Francisco, CA.

over time, such as the viability of custody arrangements, and reflected on their experiences with the legal system for resolving custody matters.

(4) *The 1993 Client Baseline Study* sampled 2,735 family court sessions across the state (87 percent of all sessions conducted during the study period), collecting extensive information from 4,088 mothers and fathers who received mediation services. Comparison with the 1991 Client Baseline Study will identify possible trends in case characteristics and case management in an era of rapid change in court environments.

To insure that the research program addresses pressing needs for information with a high rate of client input, the Statewide Office employs a collaborative research model. Research questions are identified in consultation with policy leaders, service providers, and parents who use family court services across the state. Data collection methods that facilitate client participation on a confidential basis are developed in site visits and consultation with individual court mediation service providers. Primary responsibility for the scientific merit, administration, and analysis of the findings rests with the Statewide Office.

Study Design and Content

The Family Court Services Snapshot Series Client Baseline studies are designed to collect information about all clients using family court services across the state within the designated time period of the research. Mediation on child custody and visitation issues was the service provided most often, and it is the primary focus of the study. A limited amount of descriptive information was also gathered about other family court services, such as child custody evaluations, emergency screenings, guardianships, premarital counseling, stepparent adoption, paternity actions, or counseling on other family matters.

The 1993 Client Baseline Study gathered information for a two-week period (October 25 - November 5, 1993). This was an extension of the 1991 plan, which undersampled courts with high caseloads.⁴ Although undersampling provided cost-effective population statistics for the state as a whole, it did not yield sufficient cases for subgroup comparisons of interest, such as ethnicity or special services. Counties with large caseloads often have more diverse populations. To permit comparison of client, case, and service characteristics, the 1993 Client Baseline Study sampled cases for two weeks in all courts.

Chart 1 summarizes the design and content of the 1993 Client Baseline Study. Prior to meeting with a Counselor, mediation clients filled out a "Mediation Client Profile." Clients receiving other family court services completed an abbreviated version of this form, "The FCS Client Profile," which was limited to a few descriptive questions.

⁴In 1991, data was collected for only one week in the ten counties with large enough case volumes to yield sound statistics within a one-week period. Data for the one-week counties were weighted to extrapolate to the full two-week period in 1991 Client Baseline Study analyses.

The Mediation Client Profile included descriptive information but also summarized family circumstances and issues that brought parents to mediation. Mothers and fathers were asked to describe the current situation, including arrangements for the distribution of parental time and responsibilities, and areas of conflict and cooperation between parents.

For every family court service session, the court counselor reported the types of service provided and, for child custody mediation sessions, the counselor completed a "Counselor Report," which listed the parties present in session, described special procedures, summarized issues and allegations, and described the status of the case before and after the session.

Following mediation sessions, parents completed a "Parent Viewpoint" form, which was returned in a sealed envelope addressed to the Statewide Office. This form gave parents the opportunity to evaluate the mediation process, their particular mediators, and the session just completed. To permit comparisons over time, the 1993 Parent Viewpoint repeated many of the questions included on the 1991 form. These asked for feedback about the helpfulness of the mediation process and whether issues were given a fair hearing, as well as general satisfaction with the process and the outcome of mediation. Items added in the 1993 Client Baseline Study focused on areas of discomfort with the process as well as perceptions of respectful and fair treatment of clients.

CHART 1
1993 Client Baseline Study
Design and Content

| Questionnaire: | Mediation Client Profile | Counselor Report--Child Custody and Visitation Mediation Session | Parent Viewpoint |
|--------------------|---|---|---|
| Completed by: | Each mediation client | Counselor or mediator | Mothers and fathers who used mediation |
| When completed: | Pre-session | Post-session | Post-session |
| Percent completed: | 92% | 100% | 63% |
| Contents: | Demographic profile of parents, children De facto parenting arrangements Presenting issues Inter-parental relationship/conflict Co-parenting issues | Parties present Special procedures Issues covered Allegations Description of session Status of case--before and after session Agreements made Special provisions | Service helpfulness Opportunity to discuss issues Satisfaction with process Perception of fairness and respect by mediator Satisfaction with agreement Suggestions for improvement |

Coverage and Representativeness

Chart 1 shows the proportion of study participants who completed each form. The counselor filled out a Counselor Form for each family in the sample. Ninety-two percent of the mediating parents filled out the Mediation Client Profile. In the 1993 Client Baseline Study, as in the earlier data collection, equal percents of mothers and fathers participated and about 3 percent used a Spanish language questionnaire (119 in 1993). The Parent Viewpoint was completed by only 63 percent of the mediating mothers and fathers; a slightly larger number of mothers than fathers filled out the exit form (52 percent were mothers).

The response rate for the Parent Viewpoint dropped considerably from the 1991 rate of 72 percent. In 1991, a combination of factors were suggested as contributing to the lower response rate for the Parent Viewpoint as compared to the Profile questionnaire, such as administrative oversights, the press of time, or parents' reluctance to complete additional paperwork. Given the budgetary constraints, diminished resources, and continued high caseloads in California courts by the end of 1993, those same factors could only have been enhanced.

Although 63 percent compares favorably with response rates in many other court studies, conclusions from the Parent Viewpoint must be drawn with the caveat that a substantial proportion of mothers and fathers did not offer feedback about the service. The high completion rate for the Mediation Client Profile provides a rich resource of data about case and client characteristics.

The discussion above centered on the completion rates for the instruments (i.e., what proportion of all clients participating in sessions also filled out the questionnaires). The broader issue of coverage asks how well do the sessions included in the research represent family court service sessions throughout the state. The 1991 Client Baseline Study was able to provide sound statistics and prevalence data for court-based mediation throughout the state because the sample was a representative cross-section of court mediation sessions. The information summarized in Chart 2 indicates that the 1993 Client Baseline Study sample is, again, a representative cross-section of California court-based mediation sessions.

CHART 2
1993 Client Baseline Study
Completion Rates

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Study period: | October 25-November 5, 1993 |
| Sample coverage: | 51 of 58 California counties 75 of 82 branch courts 2,735 of 3,159 FCS sessions statewide (87%) (91% of sessions in participating courts) 2,259 of 2,819 mediation sessions statewide (80%) (85% of sessions in participating courts) |
| Mediation sample: | 2,259 families |
| | 2,068 mothers 2,020 fathers 3,664 children 1,903 families with data from both mothers and fathers |

The objective of the 1993 Client Baseline Study was to include all families who used family court services in the state of California during the study period, October 25-November 5, 1993. The study covered 51 of California's 58 counties, including 75 branch courts. Information was gathered on 2,735 families seen by court-based mediators and counselors for mediation, evaluation and auxiliary services during that period. This constituted 91 percent of all families seen in the courts participating in the study. If families in the 7 nonparticipating counties are included in the statistic, the study covered 87 percent of all families who used family court services in the state of California during the study period. Extensive information was gathered about 2,259 families participating specifically in court-based mediation during that period: 80 percent of all mediating families throughout the state, and 85 percent of those in the participating courts.

All of these completion rates surpass the accepted standards of survey research in defining a sample that can be used to establish reliable statistics and prevalence data for a population. The 1993 Client Baseline Study along with the 1991 Client Baseline Study offer the best existing data, and the most representative and comprehensive data, about court-based mediation in California.